

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

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INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15

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FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA

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INFO PANCANAL

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PANAMA 05592

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PN

SUBJECT: ARIAS WINDS UP NATIONWIDE TOUR

REF: PANAMA 4853

SUMMARY: PANAMENISTA PARTY PRESIDENT ARIAS HAS JUST COMPLETED HIS MONTH-LONG, NATIONWIDE TOUR OF PANAMA, DURING WHICH HE DREW LARGE, ENTHUSIASTIC CROWDS DESPITE MINIMAL PUBLICITY AND PRESS COVERAGE. CULMINATING WITH A RALLY OF SOME 25,000 PEOPLE ON HIS HOME GROUND OF CHIRIQUI PROVINCE, ARIAS HAS CARRIED HIS ANTI-TORRIJOS, ANTI-GOVERNMENT MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE -- BUT WHAT HE CAN DO NEXT IS VERY UNCLEAR. THE GOVERNMENT, TAKING THE INITIATIVE, IS PROCEEDING WITH ITS OWN IDEAS FOR POLITICAL REFORM, AND COULD SIMPLY LEAVE ARIAS AND HIS "UNIFIED OPPOSITION" FORCES BY THE WAYSIDE. END SUMMARY.

1. PANAMENISTA PARTY PRESIDENT ARNULFO ARIAS HAS JUST COMPLETED WHAT HIS PARTISANS SEE AS A HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL NATIONWIDE TOUR. DURING THE MONTH OF

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JULY, ARIAS TRAVELED TO ALL MAJOR CITIES AND MANY SMALL TOWNS IN PANAMA TO RE-ACQUAINT THE PANAMANIAN PEOPLE WITH HIM AND TO RE-ACQUAINT HIMSELF WITH PANAMA. HE WAS ACCOMPANIED BY REPRESENTATIVES OF THE "UNIFIED OPPOSITION" (ALL IMPORTANT OPPOSITION PARTIES, MINUS THE LIBERALS) WHICH HE HEADS. REPORTEDLY, THE CROWDS GREETING HIM WERE LARGE AND ENTHUSIASTIC --

AND SPONTANEOUS, SINCE HE WAS DEPENDENT PRIMARILY ON
ON WORD-OF-MOUTH PUBLICITY. ARIAS' LAST STOPS,
OVER THE WEEK-END OF JULY 28-30, WERE IN COLON, THE
ECONOMICALLY DEPRESSED CITY AT THE ATLANTIC END OF THE
PANAMA CANAL, IN BOCAS DEL TORO PROVINCE, AND IN DAVID,
CAPITAL OF CHIRIQUI PROVINCE, HIS HOME TERRITORY.

2. TWO EMBASSY OFFICERS ATTENDED THE RALLY HELD IN
COLON THE EVENING OF JULY 28. A CROWD OF SEVERAL
HUNDRED PEOPLE AWAITED ARIAS' ARRIVAL PATIENTLY --
MUCH MORE PATIENTLY THAN DID THE EMBASSY OFFICERS --
AND GRADUALLY SWELLED TO SEVERAL THOUSAND BY THE
TIME "THE MAN" SHOWED UP TWO HOURS LATE. AS THE
RALLY PROGRESSED, THE ASSEMBLED THROGS GAILY WAVED
THEIR RED, YELLOW, AND PURPLE STRIPED PANAMENISTA
PARTY FLAGS, AND SHOUTED WITH GREAT GUSTO FOR THE
OUSTER OF TORRIJOS

3. ACCORDING TO A PANAMENISTA PARTY SPOKESMAN, THE
RALLY IN DAVID, CHIRIQUI, ON JULY 30 DREW A LARGER
CROWD, AT LEAST 25,000, WITH MORE GREETING ARIAS IN
THE STREETS AND LISTENING TO THE RALLY ON A LOCAL
RADIO STATION. SINCE ARIAS IS A CHIRICANO AND CHIRIQUI
WAS THE HOME OF A NUMBER OF BUSINESSMEN AND CATTLEMEN
WHO WERE EXILED TWO YEARS AGO FOR ALLEGED ANTI-
GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES, A WARM WELCOME FOR THE PANAMENISTAS
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WAS NOT AT ALL SURPRISING. THE PARTY EVIDENTLY FOUND
IT ALL VERY GRATIFYING AND, INDEED, WOULD HAVE BEEN
SORELY DISAPPOINTED IN ANYTHING LESS.

4. VISITS TO THE TOWNS OF CHANGUINOLA AND ALMIRANTE
IN THE BANANA-PLANTATION LAND OF BOCAS DEL TORO PROVINCE
ALSO REPORTEDLY DREW GOOD CROWDS. THIS DESPITE THE FACT
THAT, ACCORDING TO A PANAMENISTA PARTY SPOKESMAN, THE
COMMUNIST-CONTROLLED LABOR UNIONS IN BOCAS PUT A STOP
TO THE TRAIN TRANSPORTATION NECESSARY TO BRING
PLANTATION WORKERS INTO TOWN. AS A RESULT, MOST
WHO ATTENDED HAD TO GO A GOOD DISTANCE BY FOOT.

5. AND HOW HAS THE TORRIJOS GOVERNMENT RESPONDED TO
ARIAS, ONE MIGHT ASK. TO JUDGE BY THE LOCAL PRESS,
ONE WOULD HARDLY HAVE KNOWN THAT ARIAS' NATIONWIDE
TOUR WAS TAKING PLACE. COVERAGE WAS MINIMAL AND
OFTEN UNFRIENDLY, ALTHOUGH SOME RALLIES WERE BROADCAST
ON LOCAL RADIO STATIONS, AND A DELAYED BROADCAST
OF ARIAS' SPEECH AT DAVID WAS CARRIED ON TELEVISION.
IN CONTRAST, TORRIJOS MADE A PILGRIMAGE OF HIS OWN
THROUGH THE COUNTRY AT ROUGHLY THE SAME TIME, WITH

COVERAGE OF HIS SPEECHES AND MEETINGS FLOODING THE MEDIA. NEVERTHELESS,THE NATIONAL GUARD REPORTEDLY KEPT A WATCHFUL EYE OUT FOR THE GOOD DOCTOR, TO ENSURE THAT NO UNTOWARD EVENTS OCCURRED FOR WHICH THE GOVERNMENT COULD BE BLAMED. SPOKESMEN FOR ARIAS EVEN SPOKE OF TWO INCIDENTS IN WHICH THE GUARD PREVENTED GROUPS OF STUDENTS,ALLEGEDLY ARMED, FROM DISRUPTING RALLIES.

6. ARIAS' MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE OF PANAMA WAS THE SAME THROUGHOUT HIS PEREGRINATION -- BLAMING THE TORRIJOS GOVERNMENT FOR THE COUNTRY'S ECONOMIC PROBLEMS, CRITICIZ-

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ING IT FOR WHAT ARIAS SEES AS ITS POLITICAL SHORTCOMINGS, ATTACKING "COMMUNISTS IN GOVERNMENT", ACCUSING GOVERNMENT (ESPECIALLY NATIONAL GUARD) OFFICIALS OF CORRUPTION, PREACHING THE GOSPEL OF A "UNIFIED OPPOSITION" INTENT ON REMOVING TORRIJOS FROM POWER, AND CALLING FOR A BOYCOTT OF THE AUGUST 6 NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS. EARLY IN HIS SERIES OF SPEECHES, HE SUGGESTED THE POSSIBILITY OF A GENERAL STRIKE TO FORCE THE GOVERNMENT OUT OF OFFICE. ACCORDING TO PANAMENISTA PARTY SPOKESMEN, THIS SUGGESTION WAS SIMPLY THAT -- ALL ARIAS INTENDED TO DO WAS TO FEEL THE PEOPLE OUT ON THE IDEA -- AND THE IDEA DID NOT SEEM TO CATCH ON. (SINCE THEN, IN A SEPARATE DEVELOPMENT, GOVERNMENT-EMPLOYED DOCTORS HAVE GONE ON STRIKE, AN EVENT FOR WHICH THE PANAMENISTAS TAKE NO CREDIT BUT WHICH THEY VIEW WITH FAVOR.)

7. NOW THAT HE HAS DONE AND SAID ALL THESE THINGS,

HOWEVER, IT IS VERY UNCLEAR WHERE ARIAS WILL OR CAN GO FROM HERE, IF ANYWHERE AT ALL. THE GOVERNMENT, TAKING THE OFFENSIVE, HAS BEEN SPEAKING OF ITS OWN IDEAS FOR POLITICAL REFORM, AND IS CREATING A "HIGH-LEVEL COMMISSION" TO WORK OUT THE PLANS FOR CHANGES IN THE SYSTEM (PANAMA 5130). THE GOVERNMENT PLANS TO CARRY OUT REFORMS
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WITHOUT ARIAS' COOPERATION, AND THE PANAMENISTAS AND OTHER PARTIES MAKING UP THE "UNIFIED OPPOSITION" MAY JUST BE LEFT BY THE WAYSIDE IN A RE-DESIGNED SYSTEM. AND AS THE SYSTEM STANDS NOW, THERE IS SIMPLY NO MODE FOR THE PANAMENISTAS TO OUST TORRIJOS -- OR EVEN HAVE A DIRECT IMPACT ON THE EVOLVING POLITICAL SYSTEM. ARIAS STILL APPEARS TO BE WAITING FOR GOD TO COME OUT OF THE MACHINE AND PUT HIM IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT. JORDEN

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